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ABSTRACT

Intended to help the laity find their way through the confusion and controversy surrounding minimum competency testing (MCT), this paper explains what MCT is, acknowledges its limitations, weighs the criticisms, and shows how MCT may be used constructively for the benefit of students and for the improvement of schools. Highlights from the paper include the following remarks: (1) MCT can help ensure that all high school graduates possess the requisite skills to be citizens, workers, and continuing learners; (2) MCT can identify students who need help in reaching minimum standards; (3) MCT can aid school districts and states to spot schools, programs, curricula, and instruction that are not effective in meeting the needs of such students; (4) the most suitable purpose of MCT is to test the academic skills students learn in school; (5) there is nothing in the idea of a minimum standard that necessarily causes it to become viewed as a maximum; and (6) MCT alone cannot produce long-term reform or improvement in teaching and learning. (RL)

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A FEW HIGHLIGHTS FROM THIS PAPER

What is written here is intended for the laity, not for educational ecclesiastics who claim to know a lot about testing.

(page 1)

Minimum competency testing can help ensure that all high school graduates possess the requisite skills to be citizens, workers, and continuing learners. It can identify students who need help in reaching minimum standards, and it can aid school districts and states to spot schools, programs, curricula, and instruction that are not effective in meeting the needs of such students.

(page 6)

The most suitable purpose of minimum competency testing programs is to test the academic skills students learn in school, because schools are better able to define success in learning academic subjects and to measure the degree of success achieved by all students who spend time studying them.

(page 7)

There is nothing in the idea of a minimum standard that necessarily causes it to become viewed as a maximum. Minimums can be advertised as just that and no more; higher standards can be set for whatever purpose schools wish.

(page 19)

Minimum competency testing is no panacea for declining public confidence in the schools. Alone, it cannot produce long-term reform or improvement in teaching and learning. What minimum competency testing can do is to help schools and citizens to identify the most critical needs of students who have not mastered the basic skills, to concentrate on these needs in their thinking and planning, and to ensure that adequate financial support is given to these high priority tasks.

(page 22)

MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING:
GUIDELINES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND CITIZENS

by
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FOREWORD

This paper is not a polemic. Dennis Gray has written it, following more than a year's research and reflection, to help readers find their way through the confusion and controversy that attend minimum competency testing. He explains what minimum competency is, acknowledges its limitations, weighs the criticisms, and shows how minimum competency testing may be used constructively—for the benefit of students and for the improvement of schools.

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Introduction

Virtually every American who drives an automobile knows what a minimum competency test is. To obtain a driver's license, one must ordinarily take a paper-and-pencil test on traffic regulations and the operation of a motor vehicle, as well as a road test. Presumed to comprehend knowledge and skills essential to safe driving, the tests are scored on a pass-or-fail basis. Those who pass are judged competent, and licensed to drive almost anywhere, any time, and under almost any circumstances in the United States.

Yet who would hold that all licensed drivers are competent drivers? Surely no one who is aware of the nation's annual highway deaths. Plainly, passing the test is no guarantee of competence to drive.

The analogy can help us toward better understanding of the minimum competency testing phenomenon that has affected schools, now, in four-fifths of the states. One popular view—heavily influenced by what citizens learn from the news media—is that minimum competency testing will restore lost rigor to schooling and lost value to the high school diploma. People believe that, somehow, this form of testing will indicate whether children are at least minimally competent for life after high school. Knowing that minimally competent drivers kill 50,000 fellow Americans each year, we may well ask what benefits we can realistically anticipate from minimum competency testing in the schools. This paper speaks to the question.

Who Should Read This Paper?

What is written here is intended for the laity, not for educational ecclesiastics who claim to know a lot about testing. The literature on minimum competency testing, both professional and journalistic, overwhelms many untutored readers with detailed descriptions of a rapidly changing scene and with extensive, irresolute discussions of issues and problems. The blunt fact is that minimum competency testing is here. It is upon us—happening now, often hastily, chaotically, haphazardly, and ill-advisedly. The ordinary person, the non-

expert, needs help finding a way through the confusion in his quest for a sensible public policy. Although the evidence is not yet to be found that minimum competency testing is always beneficial to children's academic achievement, it is possible to chart a course for avoiding known difficulties and realizing the potentiality of minimum competency testing. Readers who have set such an objective for their schools should find this paper useful. It endeavors to distill a mass of technical discussion and to present the essence with explicit recommendations for educational policy on minimum competency testing.

Readers of this paper—school board members, state legislators and their staff members, regents of state school systems, classroom teachers, educational writers in the news media, parents of school children, and other citizens—could produce their own distillations, but they usually haven't time. Nevertheless, they may be called upon to have opinions and sometimes to cast votes on minimum competency testing. Here they may learn the major issues in the debate and have a sharper sense of what a minimum competency testing program might achieve for a state, a district, or a school. Finally, they will learn where to find more detailed information about minimum competency testing throughout the country.

What Is Minimum Competency Testing?

Minimum competency testing can be used in any school where students need special attention to make sure that they are helped to meet defined standards of minimally satisfactory performance. It takes different forms. The most publicized variants in 1979 were in Florida and New York, representative cases that illustrate the common characteristics of such testing. In both states, high school seniors will be required to pass an examination in basic English and mathematics in order to graduate with a state-approved diploma. The tests are designed to cover fundamentals that, in theory, most students should have mastered by the end of the *eighth* grade. The passing score is set by state authorities, and it is not "curved"; that is, the passing mark does not depend on how well all students perform. The cut-off is fixed in advance,

and students either pass or fail. The Florida test originated in the state legislature; New York's Board of Regents (the state board of education) took the initiative for that state's minimum competency testing.

Other varieties of minimum competency tests range from locally designed tests, linked to graduation requirements and covering any number of competencies (for example, in Oregon), to state-provided "early-warning" diagnostic tests for the elementary years (for example, South Carolina). Readers wanting state-by-state descriptive information should refer to "Suggestions for Further Reading," page 23.

Minimum competency testing is not synonymous with competency-based education. In pure form, competency-based education defines competency objectives and then proceeds without allegiance to traditional teaching methods or to such conventions as fifty-minute classes, five-day weeks, and one hundred and eighty-day school years. In other words, competency-based education can imply a wholesale redesign of schooling, while minimum competency testing requires only that the existing system pay more attention to marginal performers and help them accomplish more.

What Is the Message of the Minimum Competency Testing Movement?

Testing in America has been expected to carry a larger burden than it is capable of bearing. In the case of minimum competency tests, advocates are calling for results that would embrace nearly all today's deeply felt aspirations for the public schools:

- —Teach all students the basics.
- —Spend tax dollars to greater effect.
- —Set higher standards of achievement.
- —Inspire teachers to work harder.
- —Define priorities; stress what's most important.
- —Require schools to prove their effectiveness.
- —Make diplomas stand for competence.
- —Pay attention to the public's dissatisfactions and demands.

Obviously, satisfying all such ambitions would challenge for decades all the talents educators have for management, curriculum development, and instruction; no mere testing program could accomplish so much. Benjamin Bloom (Charles H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Education at the University of Chicago) however, offers us a sober and realistic estimate of what can be expected from minimum competency testing:

> The recent interest in setting academic standards in terms of minimum competency requirements for graduation is a development which may be the basis for insuring that most students reach particular standards of learning at various earlier grade points in the school system. If such standards can be achieved at each target point, this can be one of the more effective methods of insuring that [all children] do learn more effectively. If such minimum standards can be related to the optimal standards as well as optimal learning conditions, then most children can be brought up to the best that the public educational system can offer.[1]

In later sections of this paper, we will look at the means to achieve the end envisioned by Bloom.

Who Favors Minimum Competency Testing?

Defenders of minimum competency testing can be found in all constituencies of the public schools.

Students themselves, as a Michigan study shows, favor programs that promise to bolster the value of their high school diplomas at a time when many citizens have lost faith that diplomas certify much more than attendance.[2] Students stand to benefit from a renewal of the public's faith in schooling, especially if they happen to be enrolled in suspect or disreputable schools.

Parents, alarmed about the inadequacy of their children's preparation for work or for higher education, look to minimum competency testing to strengthen teaching and learning in the schools.

Employers complain about the lack of skills of high school graduates who cannot read instructional manuals or do fundamental business mathematics, who cannot speak articulately

to the public, or write literate business letters. Understandably, they want competence in entry-level workers.

College officials are alarmed about gradually sinking average scores for students seeking admission to higher education. They are not consoled by knowing that part of the score decline is explained as the effect of a changing college clientele. Professors recognize that even their better students are less prepared for college work than were their counterparts a decade ago. Colleges find themselves forced into providing remedial work for students who in no way can be said to have had disadvantaged schooling.

Taxpayers have many reasons to be interested. They see minimum competency testing as a way to dramatize, in a form that cannot be obfuscated or refuted, the true condition of the schools, as well as a way to call special attention to students whose achievement is less than satisfactory. In short, minimum competency testing appeals to citizens who want schools to render unequivocal accountings of their stewardship of tax dollars. In the minds of many, the rising costs of education cannot be reconciled with the reported declines in test scores. Taxpayers want the costs restrained, and they want achievement stabilized at acceptable levels, preferably higher levels than they believe exist today.

In sum, critics of the schools, believers in basic education as the first business of the schools, observers of the decline of scores registered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and people aware that textbooks are often written to the ability of students several grade levels below the level of intended use have joined in a public revolt against school failures and have become advocates of minimum competency testing. The news media have strengthened the minimum competency testing movement by giving it national publicity and by spotlighting dismaying news about test scores. The movement gains added force from the general disaffection of the public with many traditional institutions that were formerly above reproach, and citizens are not reluctant to confront educators with their dissatisfactions.

What Can Minimum Competency Testing Accomplish?

Minimum competency testing can help ensure that all high school graduates possess the requisite skills to be citizens, workers, and continuing learners. It can identify students who need help in reaching minimum standards, and it can aid school districts and states to spot schools, programs, curricula, and instruction that are not effective in meeting the needs of such students.

To set minimum standards, it is not necessary to estimate how fully students must command school learning to succeed in life. Indeed, if for no other reason than the fact that society's demands keep changing, it is simply not possible to define with accuracy what constitutes minimum ability to function in society, or to devise a formula for the relationship between success in school and success in life. But, it is possible to stipulate an agreed lower limit of achievement in designated subjects, both for schools and for students. Clearly, these will not be the same as standards that might be called "mastery" or "excellence." Such standards would far exceed the minimums. But the limitations of minimum competency testing need not preclude reasonable efforts to improve teaching and learning for all students in schools, especially those who would otherwise find school unrewarding. Conducted in this spirit, minimum competency testing can help to keep marginal students in school, and it need not be feared as an insidious means of forcing them out of school.

Minimum competency testing is not a better method for achieving this modest purpose than all other methods of school improvement. But it is a method that already has broad appeal in the minds of citizens whose confidence in public education has faltered in the last decade. For this reason, it offers a promising way to begin rebuilding confidence.

The superficial attractiveness of minimum competency testing can be misleading, however. Testing alone can never guarantee learning. Indeed, the connection between testing and learning may be tenuous, and it is often negligible. Testing leads to improved learning only if: 1) the results are

analyzed for information about students' weaknesses or indications of deficiencies in instruction; 2) below-par students are afforded additional chances to learn; and 3) schools and teachers commit themselves to changes in instruction calculated to avoid similar failures for the students who follow. The value of minimum competency testing comes from the production of systematically derived data that can be used to plan school improvements where the tests show them to be necessary.

Henry M. Brickell's analysis of policy issues can be used to frame the discussion of minimum competency testing.[3] Brickell, whose work has guided much of the national debate in recent years, provides the organizing principles of the recommendations made in this paper. A satisfactory minimum competency testing policy should provide coherent, consistent, non-contradictory answers to the following seven questions posed by Brickell:

1) What competencies should be tested?
2) How should the selected competencies be tested?
3) When should competencies be tested?
4) How many minimums should be set?
5) How high should the minimums be set?
6) Should minimums apply to schools or students?
7) What should be done about failures?

What Competencies Should be Tested?

We have acknowledged the difficulties of defining minimum competence in our society and of specifying the relationship of success in school to success in life. This means that testing "life skills" is not fruitful. The most suitable purpose of minimum competency testing programs is to test the academic skills students learn in school, because schools are better able to define success in learning academic subjects and to measure the degree of success achieved by all students who spend time studying them. An advantage of restricting minimum competency testing in school skills is that this policy in no way impairs the freedom of schools to change their curricula, instruc-

tion, and testing, because their educational programs are not predicated on a particular definition of success in life.

It is true that minimum competency testing puts the spotlight on a narrow band of educational outcomes (as most testing does). This is bound to be, because learning occurs everywhere, not just in schools, and even if testing did cover all that schools teach, it would still exclude learning that happens outside the classroom. The narrowness of minimum competency testing need not be construed as a defect, however, because the testing covers the subjects in which instruction should be most successful and for which the schools should be held most responsible.

Critics of minimum competency testing sometimes raise the argument that minimum standards will inevitably come to function as norms or as maximums. A variation of this argument is an either-or choice, presented as follows: schools must establish either minimum standards or goals (maximums). The unstated corollary is that schools cannot do both. Such arguments are red herrings; they defy the common experience of teachers. There is no barrier to stipulating minimum standards for all students to earn promotions and diplomas, at the same time setting higher standards for other purposes, e.g., honor rolls, advanced courses, etc.

In any case, schools cannot escape the need to decide what they are going to teach and then to make clear provisions for it, both in curriculum and in instruction. Minimum competency standards cannot possibly define the entire curriculum. They merely set a floor under a fraction of the typical school program, albeit an important fraction.

The states and school districts that have decided to prescribe competencies in life (survival) skills, rather than in school (academic) skills, probably will come to regret the decision. In the first place, stating that a school must choose between testing life skills or school skills is to make a false distinction, one suggesting that living and schooling are mutually exclusive. This is another example of false issues that crop up in discussions of minimum competency testing. Nevertheless, it

is valuable to remember that schools are special places for learning. They do not have and should not claim the ability to instruct young people in everything necessary for adult living. But schools have a unique responsibility to provide every student with the foundation of knowledge and skills on which to build all post-school learning: this is called "basic education." Definitions of basic education may vary. The Council for Basic Education advocates instruction for all students in the basic intellectual disciplines, especially English (including reading, writing, speech, and literature), mathematics, science, history, geography, government, foreign languages, and the arts. Other definitions are more restrictive, but all include at least mastery of reading, writing, and computing. Because competence in these skills is essential for other learning both in and out of school, they should be the basis of a minimum competency testing program. There are good reasons for schools to begin with this limited base and to take a cautious approach.

First, the basic learning skills are easy to test, since they lend themselves readily to paper-and-pencil testing. Second, a testing program in the three basic learning skills will enjoy what testmakers call "face validity." This means nothing more than the idea that most people will look at minimum competency standards in the three "Rs" and agree quickly that, yes, the schools ought to be guaranteeing at least modest levels of basic skills for all students who pass through twelve years of schooling. When minimum competency testing programs reach beyond testing of the basic learning skills, debate intensifies over the question of what competencies should be included. This is the inevitable outcome of the difficulty of reaching broad consensus on the definition of basic education, let alone the definition of necessary skills for success in life.

In the minds of some teachers, their academic freedom is at stake in any decision to establish a testing program. They contend that testing programs become dictatorial, coercing them to emphasize what they might not freely choose to teach. That, of course, is a spurious argument, one predicated on the idea

that every teacher is hired by a school district solely to exercise private judgment in all curriculum matters, totally free of guidance by the local school board. The only proper name for such a situation would be anarchy, a condition to which few subscribe.

The ideal way to proceed in the design of a program would be to *start with the curriculum* and *then develop a testing program that matches* the curriculum objectives. Unfortunately, conditions seldom permit the ideal to be realized. Schools have chickens and eggs at the same time. They simply cannot stop either curriculum development or test development and start from scratch. What they can do, however, is determine the modifications of curriculum and testing that are necessary to evolve a good match. Many school districts are afflicted with poor matches, simply failing to teach the very subjects on which their students are tested. Sometimes curriculum supervisors don't communicate with testing personnel. In such cases, it should come as no surprise that children do not do as well on tests as do children in other school districts where the match is better.

When a community debates what competencies are to be tested, the resulting consensus—or even the delineation of disagreement—is a benefit. Many constituents of the public schools naively imagine that their own ambitions for schools are identical with those of most other people. They may also assume that their own priorities for the schools are widely shared by others. Of course, there are communities in which this enviable condition exists, but the more common condition is a wide range of goals and objectives (and ensuing conflict over priorities) among all the people interested in the schools. Merely bringing these divisions into the sunshine can be efficacious, especially if new awareness leads nearer to agreement about the mission of the schools.

How Should the Selected Competencies be Tested?

The answer to Brickell's second question can be brief. Paper-and-pencil tests are the best means currently available for

schools developing minimum competency testing programs. This is so for several reasons. Most obviously, schools are more familiar with paper-and-pencil tests than with the other forms, which frequently require testing expertise quite beyond that normally found in local school districts, and require unwarranted administration. Paper-and-pencil tests in basic skills can be made machine-scorable; they permit ample coverage for each skill being tested; they can produce results that are consistently reliable and valid from session to session; and they are least costly in terms of time, money, and inconvenience. Of course, alternative types of competency tests may be required for students with disabilities—Braille tests for students without sight, for example, or spoken tests for students who are physically unable to write.

When Should Competencies be Tested?

Minimum competency testing programs around the country have answered this question in various ways—for example, by scheduling the tests at the ends of grades three, six, eight, and ten. Each of these terms is thought to correspond with one stage of education. The end of grade three marks the conclusion of early elementary schooling; the end of grade six, the conclusion of the upper elementary years, etc.

Emphasis on testing students' competencies in the basic skills is especially important during the elementary years. Because the testing necessarily occurs after the completion of instruction, the bad news about particular students always comes late. But the information can be used to modify curriculum and instruction for oncoming pupils and for tailoring curriculum and instruction to correct deficiencies for individual students during the next stage of their education. Schools should expect the majority of students to achieve mastery of basic learning skills by the end of elementary school, while a small minority will need additional help even during high school.

How Many Minimums Should be Set?

The issue here is whether for any given grade there should be common minimum standards in the basic skills for all students and schools or multiple minimums differentiated according to the ability and educational background of the students or the characteristics of individual schools. Again, the argument for simplicity prevails. There should be a single minimum standard for each test.

But the most important principle is that no test score should ever be the sole criterion for making such important decisions as grade-to-grade promotion or graduation from high school. Other criteria should be defined and used in combination with minimum competency testing results. For example, decisions about graduation should not rest on minimum competency test scores alone, but on the types of courses students have taken, the course credits they have accumulated, their record of attendance, their cumulative grade averages, and evaluations by teachers. It is also important to remember that nothing in minimum competency testing need prevent schools from having higher academic standards for students to qualify for honors work or specialized programs.

How High Should the Minimums be Set?

This is the classic central question of public policy: How much is enough? In this context, the question is how much demonstrated competency in basic skills is enough to warrant concluding that both student and school have done minimally acceptable jobs? To answer the question, three important assumptions must be explicit.

First, there is no scientific way to determine the minimum competence in basic skills necessary for successful adulthood. Ultimately, the judgment as to how high the minimums should be set will be discretionary. Second, the minimums should be comparatively low, particularly at the onset of new minimum competency testing programs. Minimums set too high will inevitably cause high and therefore politically unacceptable rates of failure, and the resulting outcry may prevent

gradual reform of the schools. It is only realistic to admit that modest minimums will be more easily adjusted upward than minimums initially set too high can be adjusted downward. Third, the process by which minimums are set is critical, because the public's trust in that process will determine the public's acceptance of the program.

The rudiments of the process for setting standards are simple enough. Minimums should be absolutes, hypothesized initially by educators acting with the advice of different consultants, then tested experimentally with sample groups of students. The people who have voices in the process should include representatives of both sexes, all racial, ethnic, and cultural groups likely to be affected by the test, and other groups with legitimate interests (for example, teachers, parents, employers, school boards, legislators). Since one of the major purposes of minimum competency testing is to help restore public confidence in teaching and learning, the character of the consultative process sketched here has great importance.

Setting minimums is a difficult technical problem, as a considerable body of erudite literature attests. After all, it is never easy to define desired human qualities. Given the nature of the process in this instance, periodic reconsideration of standards is imperative. All standards must be regarded as tentative and approximate, since they are unavoidably judgmental, not empirical.

Once minimum standards have been established and the testing program has begun, a panel should be created to handle challenges to judgments of student performance, particularly in the cases of students near the borderline between pass and fail. Moreover, students should be permitted to satisfy minimum competency standards without taking the tests, if other valid information proving their competence is available. For example, satisfactory completion of particular courses or sufficiently high scores on standardized achievements tests may be suitable substitutes for minimum competency testing in basic skills.

Educational authorities who manage this standard-setting process must recognize that satisfactory planning cannot be done hastily. The Educational Testing Service, the nation's largest developer of standardized tests, has estimated that at least two full weeks per test are required for setting standards in achievement tests. A democratic process for minimum competency testing may prove to be even more time-consuming. Planners should anticipate that *years* of experience will be needed to determine whether standards have been set appropriately or need to be modified. And of course there will be critics who hold that kind of stretched-out timetable to be totally unacceptable.

Should Minimums Apply to Schools or Students?

In some ways, this is a misleading question; it presents an either-or choice that only partially corresponds to the reality of minimum competency testing. Properly planned and put into action, a minimum competency testing program in basic skills embraces the entire school community, and it may be impossible for any of the parties involved to extricate themselves from shared responsibility. *Students* are expected to perform at or above the specified minimums. Good students can tutor other students who are having trouble learning. *Teachers* are expected to provide necessary instruction and encouragement for all students, and especially for those who need extra help. School *administrators* must supervise the program and be prompt to modify it if necessary. School *board members* or state *legislators* set the basic policy that establishes a minimum competency testing program. *Parents* should make sure that their own children and their children's schools are meeting their obligations. The *public* has the responsibility to support the goal of competency for all, to finance and support school testing programs, and to become better informed on testing than frequently is the case. *Testmakers*, whether in testing corporations or in the schools themselves, should match tests to the educational objectives of the schools using the tests; they should give evidence that their

tests are valid and reliable; and they should help to educate their various publics on testing. All these constituents have some responsibility for the determination of minimum competency standards, with the ultimate decisions about standards left to educators acting under elected or appointed governing boards.

Since students must meet the test standards, they are likely to feel the immediate repercussions of any neglected responsibilities in this complex process—even though schools and teachers should bear the brunt. This is a danger that ought to be high on a list of concerns of parents and policymakers. School officials should safeguard students by reporting test scores to students and parents together with explanations of what the scores mean, what they do not mean, and how they will be used to improve students' learning.

What Should be Done About Failures?

Think first about *students* who fail minimum competency tests, because they are the most vulnerable to a direct backlash.

The initial response to the news that a test has found a student below minimum standards in basic skills should be to verify the findings, using all other available forms of evidence—other test scores, teachers' opinions, grade averages, and the parent's comments. If the test results are corroborated, attention should shift immediately to identifying that student's particular difficulties and deficiencies. The earlier these are found, the more time the school has to take constructive steps. Students should be given several chances to meet minimum standards, using other types of assessment, if that makes sense.

The most common (and most glib) reply to the question of what to do about incompetent students is the one word, "remediate." Yet schools are often far from certain that they know how. One thing is sure: remedial work is not doing more of the same that resulted in failure in the first place.

Schools, teachers, and parents should recast the program of

study for students who have failed to meet minimum standards. This need not (and probably should not) mean simple retention in grade. It may call for the opening of special, new paths like the New York City public schools' "transitional classes." If large numbers of students fail, the message is clear: overhaul the curriculum and instruction.

The question of what to do about incompetent students is related to policies for promotion and graduation as well as to the possibility of developing individual plans for those who need them. These young people must be handled sensibly; they have not prospered in the system, and orthodoxy may not be their remedy. Schools must find ways to cope with such cases, making sure that teachers, counselors, and parents all share responsibility. Final authority for decisions should rest with an individual qualified to make them or with an appropriately constituted committee.

Critics of minimum competency testing programs have warned that the setting of minimum standards will prompt teenagers to drop out of school, believing that such a move will be less stigmatizing than a certificate of attendance in lieu of a diploma. This smacks of scare tactics. Consider the situation that now exists in many school districts. Students either graduate or do not graduate; there are, in fact, two degrees of "qualification" for entering the adult world. In reality, however, the distinction between graduates and nongraduates is not especially compelling or useful. We know there are graduates who are incompetent; we know, too, that there are nongraduates who are superior to some graduates. It is precisely this confusion about official categories that brought the minimum competency testing movement. Surely it is neither beyond our capabilities nor unthinkable to establish more comprehensively descriptive certificates for students who have completed different school programs of instruction at different levels of competence in the basic skills.

What should be done about incompetent *schools?* Let there be no doubt that minimum competency testing will surely give evidence of what is already well known, namely, that some

schools do a better job than others, given students who are alike. There is already enough evidence to help us understand what the important variables are for determining school effectiveness.[4] Let us assume in this discussion that we are talking about schools with comparable students—not proposing to make invalid comparisons between schools.

Responsible educational authorities should seek to verify the findings that emerge from comparisons of school performance. Like students, schools that do not meet reasonable expectations—that is, schools that do not appear to be helping students to reach minimally acceptable levels—should be given multiple chances to meet the standards.

When a school's deficiencies are confirmed, however, the authorities must initiate changes in educational programs and correct, transfer, or remove personnel whose performance is not satisfactory. Such bold suggestions would of course be accepted as routine in most non-school activities. The State of New York has announced a plan to place on probation any public schools where fewer than 85 percent of the pupils pass minimum competency tests. Students should not be held solely accountable when tests find them incompetent, and they will not be, when minimum competency testing works right. If the notion of shared responsibility throughout the education community is to have meaning, students, parents, teachers, administrators, policysetters, and testmakers must all be held to the one standard that applies to all: Failure demands reform.

What Are the Pitfalls?

Certain students

At least three kinds of students pose particular problems for minimum competency testing programs: 1) students with low ability in standard English, 2) students with physical handicaps or learning disabilities, and 3) students who make frequent moves from one school district to another. Let it be said that none of the three presents difficulties that are peculiar to minimum competency testing. On the contrary, their situations affect virtually everything to do with their schooling.

In general terms, there are four ways to accommodate such

students. Schools may simply exempt them from minimum competency tests and substitute individual educational plans as the path to satisfactory completion of minimum standards. Or they may establish different criteria but use the same tests that are employed for the majority of students. Third, schools may modify testing procedures in order to meet the special needs of these students. Such changes may mean delaying test dates or using different types of testing. Fourth, schools may decide simply to take no special action and to hold all students to the same minimum standards. A decision of this kind need not be construed as callously insensitive, if it is coupled with willingness to explain the special circumstances to those who use the test results.

Local control

Another set of difficulties arises from traditional concerns about preserving local control of the schools. The abhorrence of intervention by outsiders—with the obvious exception of interference in the form of untrammeled dollars—is reflected in the absence of any organized national effort to control or coordinate the minimum competency testing movement. For example, there is not yet an emerging national consensus about what specific learning objectives might be defined and then matched to appropriate testing at different levels. Nevertheless, a familiar story for the development of minimum competency testing programs begins with a state or school district noticing that such testing is underway elsewhere. It continues with a search for information about what is happening here and there, and ends with a form of testing that is touted as fitting local circumstances. People seem to resist the idea of conformity in principle but accept it in practice.

That being true, the U.S. Department of Education might recognize the need to help achieve a higher degree of coordination of the activities in nearly 40 states. To date, the Federal government has been standoffish, perhaps because it is sensitive to longstanding opposition to Federal intervention. Another difficulty for the planners of minimum competency testing is the lack of a large "bank" of validated test questions.

The Federal government might help create such a bank, one larger than that currently available from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In a new development, the National Institute of Education, a Federal agency, began a program to inform policymakers, parents, teachers, and the public about the pros and cons of minimum competency testing. The information should be available in 1981.

Narrow curricula

Critics often complain that minimum competency will inevitably constrain curricula. Would that be such a bad result? Excess zeal and misdirected energy in educational reform are almost traditional. Recent history is replete with examples, and it is difficult to conclude that the curricula of elementary and secondary schools require no added emphasis on the basic learning skills. Ample evidence compels the belief that some schools fail to teach these basic skills and some students fail to learn them. Minimum competency tests, properly designed, are directed at correcting this deplorable deficiency.

Minimums become maximums

What is the effect of minimum competency tests on good students? Will emphasis on minimums breed mediocrity? Will minimums come to be viewed as entirely satisfactory levels of performance or, worse, as the maximums? Unfortunately, the achievement of mediocrity will seem appealing to some students, some parents, and some teachers—people who are satisfied with barely scraping by. That insight may be discouraging, but it should not be surprising. On the other hand, it would be shocking to find such an attitude in the leadership of schools. If found, it should lead to dismissal. Aside from such considerations of human nature, there is nothing in the idea of a minimum standard that necessarily causes it to become viewed as a maximum. Minimums can be advertised as just that and no more; higher standards can be set for whatever purpose schools wish. There must be no confusion of minimum expectations and higher ambitions. The minimums are best understood as an obligation accepted by the schools when demanded by the public that supports them.

The higher ambitions reflect a determination to achieve well beyond what can be accomplished when schools perform at the lowest acceptable levels.

Unfair to minorities

Another common complaint is that minimum competency tests are unfair to minority groups. That persons who are socially and economically disadvantaged have difficulties in achieving the academic success of their more advantaged counterparts is a harsh fact. Knowledgeable educators also recognize the danger of creating test items that are culturally biased. But these are different and separable matters. With respect to the first, the country must acknowledge that the incidence of social and economic disadvantage is higher among blacks and Hispanics than among whites. Whether this observation leads to unfairness in minimum competency testing depends on what happens to students who fail the tests. One of the important purposes of minimum competency testing should be to help identify the children for whom the schools are not working. The failure of schooling for such students is not inevitable. Research evidence cited earlier shows that all children can learn and that schools can make a difference in the effectiveness of their learning. Minimum competency testing will call attention to those in need of everyone's best efforts.

The second part of the racial unfairness critique has to do with individual test questions, and these are matters for testmakers. The implication of the danger that tests can be racially or culturally biased is that individual test questions must be reviewed by qualified members of groups likely to be adversely affected. Their purpose, obviously, will be to expunge biased test questions.

Local or state mandates

Debate continues on the question whether minimum competency tests should be mandated on a statewide basis or simply developed at the state level and taken as local options. For reasons of efficiency and economy, tests can probably be developed more efficiently and economically by state depart-

ments of education rather than by individual school districts. Without preventing local districts from adding test sections that serve local purposes, state-level initiatives should relieve local districts of major responsibilities for minimum competency testing. One powerful argument for taking this approach is the lack of qualified testing personnel in many local school districts, especially the smaller ones. Other considerations also weigh heavily: the cost of testing, the need for disinterested evaluation of local test results, the prevalence of pupil transfers between school districts and thus the greater convenience of a single testing program for a state.

There are arguable exceptions to the idea of statewide mandates. Large school districts, for example, may be fully capable of developing their own programs without state assistance. And statewide programs run the risk that test results may be misused for making invalid comparisons between school districts having vastly different populations and problems. This concern will be lessened by limiting minimum competency testing to basic skills, rather than broader areas of academic knowledge.

Tracking

There is another nettlesome question that complicates minimum competency testing: the question of tracking. To put it exactly, will not special instruction for students with low test scores result in segregating such students from their peers and stigmatizing them? If we are to take this question seriously, we must first acknowledge the common practice of pretending that all students who attend school for twelve years are achieving at roughly the same level and that the high school diploma attests to this equality. Or, to state it another way, we have to believe that the recognition of individual differences and acceptance of them for the purpose of planning, teaching, and learning are counter to the welfare of students. This point of view conflicts with accepted practices that segregate pupils according to career interests, math ability, prowess in sports, desire to learn a foreign language, etc. It is perverse to stigmatize students for receiving instruction

tailored to their demonstrated need for improvement in basic learning skills. The fault properly should attach to the schools for not teaching them in the first place. The issue of how schools group students for learning the basic skills has only minor significance when minimum competency testing leads to the discovery and correction of deficient basic skills early in the elementary years.

Summing Up

Public understanding of the purposes and limitations of minimum competency testing will determine the expectations that arise among students, parents, educators, taxpayers, and policymakers. Minimum competency testing is no panacea for declining public confidence in the schools. Alone, it cannot produce long-term reform or improvement in teaching and learning. What minimum competency testing can do is to help schools and citizens to identify the most critical needs of students who have not mastered the basic skills, to concentrate on these needs in their thinking and planning, and to ensure that adequate financial support is given to these high priority tasks. Not many states or local districts are comfortable about cutting back on other programs in order to find the money for minimum competency testing. That is what must be done, however, because the only logical justification for minimum competency testing is the fact that schooling fails some students.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Bloom, in *Prejudice and Pride: The Brown Decision After Twenty-Five Years, A Report from the National Academy of Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979).
2. *Student Government Survey of a Competency-Based Diploma* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Kalamazoo Public Schools, 1978).
3. Henry M. Brickell, *Let's Talk About Minimum Competency Testing* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1978).
4. For example, see Ronald Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership*, October 1979; Michael Rutter et al., *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); George Weber, *Inner-City Children Can Be Taught to Read: Four Successful Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1971).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING ON MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

For a comprehensive yet manageable introduction, pick one:

The Competency Challenge: What Schools Are Doing, 1978, 96 pp. A superior introduction to the subject. It places minimum competency testing in the larger context of national concern about the competency of public school graduates. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209, (703) 528-5840. Single copy, $7.95.

The Competency Movement, Problems and Solutions, 1978, 92 pp. Another superior introduction, by Shirley Boes Neill, with excellent "how-to" tips for policymakers and administrators. American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209, (703) 528-0700. Single copy, $8.95; discounts for larger orders.

Minimum Competency Testing, 1980, 38 pp. A brief, inexpensive, balanced appraisal of the subject by Rodney P. Riegel and Ned B. Lovell. Phi Delta Kappa, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402, (812) 339-1156. Fastback Number 137. Single copy, $.75.

For help in framing public discussions:

Let's Talk About Minimum Competency Testing, 1978, 38 pp. A combination discussion guide and citizens' questionnaire by Henry M. Brickell. Education Commission of the States, 300 Lincoln Tower, 1800 Lincoln St., Denver, CO 80295, (303) 861-4917. Report Number 110. 1-4 copies, $5.00 each; discounts for larger orders.

Minimum Competency Recommendations, 1978, 12 pp. An excellent, concise statement of policy recommendations and their rationale; intended for state officials, but useful at every level. Education Commission of the States, 300 Lincoln Tower, 1800 Lincoln St., Denver, CO 80295, (303) 861-4917. Single copy, free.

Competence for All Through Collaboration of All, 1979, 24 pp. Written for citizens wanting reform in urban schools, this slender but muscular pamphlet by David S. Seeley explains how communities can ensure that all students master basic skills. The Public Education Association, 20 W. 40th St., New York City 10018, (212) 354-6100. Single copy, $1.00.

Competency Tests and Graduation Requirements (Second Edition), 1979, 84 pp. Contains 42 pages of sample test questions. National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091, (703) 860-0200. Single copy, $4.00; discounts for larger orders.

For an overview of important legal considerations:

Legal Implications of Minimum Compentency Testing, 1980, 42 pp. Attorney Joseph Beckham assesses the situation and provides guidelines for policymakers. An excellent brief introduction to the legal complexities. Phi Delta Kappa, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402, (812) 339-1156. Fastback Number 138, Single copy $.75.

For news from other states:

Update VIII: Minimum Competency Testing, July 1, 1979, 130 pp. A state-by-state summary of legislation, rulings by state boards of education, and activities by state departments of education. Prepared by Chris Pipho, Associate Director of the Research and Information Department at ECS, who always has the latest word on new developments. Education Commission of the States, 300 Lincoln Tower, 1800 Lincoln St., Denver, CO 80295, (303) 861-4917. Report Number 124. Single copy, $6.50.

For keeping up with current events:

Phi Delta Kappan, an excellent journal, published monthly during the school year, that emphasizes issues, trends, and policies in education. Minimum competency testing has been thoroughly covered for five years. The June edition contains an annual index. Reprints of articles are available. Phi Delta Kappa, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402, (812) 339-1156. Subscription rate, $12 per year; single issues, $1.50 each.

For a better understanding of the historical background:

Minimum Competency, 1978, 35 pp. A useful compilation of documents that reveals the thinking of many educational leaders on minimum competency testing. National School Boards Association, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Washington, DC 20007, (202) 337-7666. Research Report 1978-3. Single copy, $7.50, prepaid.

Minimum Competency Achievement Testing: Motives, Models, Measures, and Consequences, 1980, 487 pp. A valuable compendium of scholarly papers by 38 writers comprising an impressive "Who's Who" in minimum competency testing. The publisher calls it "multidimensional analysis"—"a balanced, comprehensive, and unhurried examination" of the subject. Edited by Richard M. Jaeger and Carol Kehr Tittle. McCutchan Publishing Corp., 2526 Grove St., Berkeley, CA 94704, (415) 841-8616. Single copy, $17.50 prepaid.

For mastering the rudiments of testing:

Parents Can Understand Testing, 1980, 88 pp. An indispensable introduction to the complexities of testing, from teacher-made quizzes to national testing programs, by Henry S. Dyer. The National Committee for Citizens in Education. Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, MD 21044, (301) 997-9300. Single copy, $2.50.

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